

## **Glen Oak Park**

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A lovely park was once built with lush gardens, forests, and many fun activities. All of Peoria came to see it; nobody wanted to miss out. It was organized by the best engineers and landscapers. This park was soon declared a favorite in Peoria. It always provided a place for citizens to go to relax and unwind. This park was Glen Oak Park. Since 1896, Glen Oak Park has been a “people’s park,” providing citizens with activities and programs; therefore, much of its history relates to the citizens of Peoria, their families and their lives.

The Peoria park system was established in 1893 with the purchase of “Birkett Hollow,” which had seventy-two acres. Glen Oak Park was officially opened and dedicated on September 7, 1896. When it opened, over 30,000 people attended its dedication. The park was greatly appreciated by the citizens of Peoria. Over 51,000 visited it the first year it was open. Even after several other parks were established, such as Bradley Park, Lincoln, Detweiller, Glen Oak was still considered the most popular. People enjoyed Glen Oak because it contained the most facilities to use. By 1899, concerts, picnics, and miscellaneous excursions drew over 135,995 visitors from June to October, again proving that Glen Oak was very popular. Oscar F. DuBuis was the one chosen to create Glen Oak Park. Because he was chosen, Glen Oak was looked upon as a majestic park with “metropolitan airs.” He was selected in 1894 and was also the first park engineer and landscape gardener. Of course, they meant that he was the best choice to design Glen Oak Park. He was admired by many; hence, when he was chosen, the

citizens of Peoria felt they were in good hands. After Glen Oak was built, the Peoria County Old Settlers Association started a campaign to raise money for a double log cabin. They went to work quickly, trying to get an addition in as soon as possible. One of the cabins was to be a pioneer dwelling and the other, a museum. These cabins would be accessible to citizens, after they were finished. Here they could learn more about their culture. After the plans for the cabins were complete, the Peoria County Old Settlers Association asked citizens to pay \$3 for logs for the cabins. On April 21, 1897, “Log Cabin Day,” construction started. The Glen Oak conservatory was a place to which people flocked.

Towards the end of World War I, the park board decided to make a ten-acre addition to the north. This would be a place for planting trees. These trees would be a memorial for the soldiers of World War I that died. Most of these trees were killed because of a Dutch elm blight during the 1940s. Many fountains were at Glen Oak; at the Perry Street entrance, where colored lights glowed at night, and at the sunken garden along Prospect and outside the Palm House. These features could have been admired by many more people, if only they were kept. The fountains were among the most popular destinations. An observation tower was complete by 1906 and offered a view twenty to thirty miles in any direction. This was heavily used to take pictures for postcards. It may have been comparable to Tower Park in Peoria Heights, which is a rare beauty.

The Glen Oak Pavilion was an instant success. This brought the community together and allowed them to use this space for much more than parties. These community activities were very special. The Park Boards report stated that year, “The building is in charge of a caterer who serves meals, luncheons, ice cream, coffee, candies,

cigars. At any and all times at a reasonable cost. During the past winter (1896-97) the dancing hall has been used quite frequently by parties for dances, socials, and banquets.” Although Glen Oak had many different features, statues did not appear until the turn of the century. Statues can be seen as amazing works of art, depriving the citizens of this luxury could make them feel empty. The famous Glen Oak lagoon was excavated at the turn of the century. Work was started in 1898 to transform a ravine into a man-made lagoon that would cover four and a quarter acres. This was called Rose Island. It was the new spot for fishing and boating and you did not have to go all the way to the river. Over a long distance, a walkway was constructed with benches and drinking fountains. The Ernest H. Wilson Garden and Plant Study Club, after it organized in 1931, worked on their first project: the memorial garden. When this garden was flooded, a new site was chosen, just north of the present conservatory. It is more widely known today as The Luthy Botanical Garden. Peoria, along with few other cities in the United States, received captured siege guns from the Spanish-American War.

Since 1896, Glen Oak Park has been a people’s park, providing citizens with activities and programs; therefore, much of its history relates to the citizens of Peoria, their families, and their lives. Although it may not seem like it, Glen Oak really did influence the people of Peoria. Without it, the park phenomenon would not have started until much later. Therefore, the people of Peoria relied on Glen Oak to bring about a new generation of entertainment. Peoria had become a better, more prosperous city, in the end, leaving a great legacy. [From Theo Jean Kenyon, “Glen Oak Park ‘A People’s Park’—85 Years Old,” *The Journal Star*, Sept. 6, 1981; Theo Jean Kenyon, “Glen Oak Park: A People Place,” *The Journal Star*, Sept. 25, 1983; Theo Jean Kenyon, “Ghosts of

Glen Oak, *The Journal Star*, Oct. 4, 2006; Pat Landen, "Glen Oak Park Provides Bits and Pieces of Peoria History," *The Journal Star*, July 24, 1985; and Vivere Research.

"Historic Peoria." *Historic Peoria*,

<<http://www.historicpeoria.com/entry.php?eid=197&catid=2&cid=1>>. (Sept. 7, 2006).]